

## The art of soundwalk

Tourist offices try every effort to seduce people to visit their cities or regions. The key word is experience. Visiting a city needs added value, we have to feel the city. Hip tools such as tablets and smartphones are thrown in to make it happen. In this context also the soundwalk has been discovered. Equipped with smart tools you sent visitors into the city. Just check [soundwalk.com](http://soundwalk.com) to get the idea. Take e.g. the walk in romantic Paris Saint Germain des Pres. To quote the website: *'Virginie Ledoyen saunders through the streets once walked by the likes of Baudelaire, Appolinaire, Prévert and Sartre. These wandering ghosts of French poetry lure around here, creating a dreamy atmosphere as she enlightens us with the richness of Saint Germain des Pres. Strolling the streets aimlessly at first, the young beauty is captivated by the aura of a young man...'* Through the app you become of a rather cinematic augmented reality. You boldly go where fellow app-owners have gone before.

It's all nicely wrapped up in an 'infotainment' package. The apps are made in a professional way and artists collaborate to make your visit unforgettable. Apparently creative entrepreneurs do good business. [Soundwalk.com](http://Soundwalk.com) lists already 32 different sound walks on their website. And they are not the only providers who make money with these touristic apps.

From 2013 onwards, Flanders Festival Kortrijk starts a collection of soundwalks for the City of Kortrijk. Also these walks will be quite an experience. And made by artists who will guide people through the city. We start with two walks and in the next years we will add new projects to the collection. So what's the difference? First of all we will not make money with it. But most important, the starting point is the production, presentation and promotion of art projects, the work of interesting sound artists and composers.

My good colleague Carsten Seiffarth is sceptic. We rumble in the jungle when we discuss the topic. With evergreens as: 'Field recording is not sound art' or in one of his latest mails *'I don't like sound walks, but it seems to be necessary to do such things in our society, where the idea of deep listening as a practise is quite dead' ;-)'*. I understand his point of view in which sound art – rooted in the German tradition of *Klang Kunst* – relates to the interaction between sound and space and takes 'installation art' as a point of departure. Of course he has a point if he wittingly writes about the dead of 'deep listening'. This is indeed a problem. But let's elaborate. Is it not a problem of concentration in general? We can easily make an analogy to e.g. 'deep looking'. The Metropolitan Museum of Arts (New York) studied that the average time visitors watch one painting is 17 seconds. In The Louvre it is even worse. Leonardo de Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' is worth an average looking time of 15 seconds by its visitors. Of course the enormity of paintings in display does not help. But still, we are talking about exceptional historical world heritage.

We are told to live in a world that sends us thousands of visual stimuli per day. But we hardly hear about the equal amount of auditive stimuli. And especially, no one seems aware anymore of the auditive quality of her or his environment. Maybe, just like Steve Roden in his latest exhibition in Hörgalerie Singuhr, we should do more 4'33"-practice<sup>1</sup>. Becoming aware of what our neighbourhood sounds like.

Already, more than a century ago the question about sound awareness was raised. With the industrial revolution from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, our sonic environment has changed drastically. Factories and machinery and its noise were a new phenomena. Even to the point where noise pollution and noise itself became a source of inspiration for artists and composers. Next to the experiments of the avant-garde, scientists studied acoustics, psycho-acoustics, techniques of recording and sound analysis. We learned that eye and ear are well connected to perceive our surrounding world. But still today the auditive is underestimated, hence the proverb 'to see is to believe'. Already in 1916 futurist Luigi Russolo stated that when looking at a landscape painting we miss an important – if not the most important – component: the sound of the landscape.

And this is precisely the point where I think soundwalks can be helpful. Artists who invest in soundwalks – of course also a relation between space and sound – invite the audience to 'deep listening'. Each in their own way they use techniques to provide a context for listening, to discover sonic environments. This can

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to the so often wrongly called silent piece 4'33" by John Cage

be done by filtering sounds, using compositions with sounds of the city (fieldrecording), via the use of 'artefacts', adding comments to the sonic environment or narrative elements.

In 1974 soundwalk-pioneer Hildegard Westerkamp defined it as following: *'A sound walk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment... The intention of soundwalk is listening. Soundwalks can take place in the mall, at the doctor's office, down a neighbourhood street or at the bus stop. The focus on listening can make this a meditative activity (...)'*.

With this quote we plunge in the history of soundwalk. The text 'Soundwalking: creating moving environmental sound narratives' by Dr. Andra McCartney<sup>2</sup> is strongly recommended. She brings us to the first use of the term by the World Soundscape Project, under the leadership of composer R. Murray Schafer. Hildegard Westerkamp was a member of this research project that expressed a strong concern about noise pollution. Interestingly enough, her text touches the historical practice of *'listening while walking (...), as well as practices of walking meditation, in which attention to listening figures prominently'*. In the prolongation of this more philosophical approach, it is worthwhile to investigate the work of J.F. Augoyard at Cresson (*Centre de Recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain*) founded in 1979. Their research includes *'acoustic architecture, urban acoustics, anthropology of space, sonic environment, urban sociology, and theories of architectural and urban ambiances. Augoyard is a philosopher and musicologist (...) His doctoral dissertation (...) is a methodological and theoretical consideration of ways of walking in an urban environment'*.

Dr. McCartney guides us through the history via soundwalks of Gregg Walgstaff, blind walks by Francisco Lopez, electrical walks by Christina Kubisch, the sound pilgrimage of Olivier Schreier, the shadow walks of Viv Corringham, the audio walks by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller and finally – the starting point of this text – soundwalk.com.

But let me take you through a personal history of sound walks.

Sound art and consequently soundwalks, were revealed through musicians who experimented with the boundaries of music or concerts. Artists who take music – or let's call it 'organised sounds' – to another dimension. The result was a large number of exhibitions of international sound art installations, performances of sound artists and soundwalks. Out of this practice came a rather childlike definition of sound art: art that makes sound. Not an attempt to make a stir or to evoke cheap discussion, but a way to not isolate the genre. A way to allow artists who work in a relevant way with sound to be 'part of the game'. Them and their projects lead to the next steps.

Let's talk about four examples, projects that were influential:

Electrical Walk by Christina Kubisch.

In 2005 I visited the exhibition 'Her Noise' in London<sup>3</sup>. The exhibition presented the work of female sound artists and musicians, a.o. two 'electrical' works by Christina Kubisch (Berlin, °1948). One of them was the 'Electrical Walk London'. Kubisch develops these walks since 2003 as a result of her research on electromagnetic induction as a sound source for her sound installations since the 70's. These sounds emerge by the interaction between magnetic fields, such as electrical wires traversing space in which sounds circulate or selfmade headphones with magnetic coils. In her walks you are equipped with one of these headphones. The headphones respond to the electrical fields in the city environment. Or you could say, they unveil hidden sounds of a city. Experiencing this for the first time is quite a treat. A map suggests listening spots chosen by the artist. It can be ATM's, shops security panels or tubular lights. Each of them has a specific sound, ranging from respectively white noise, to heavy noise and a string-like sustained sound. The fun begins when you take time to explore it yourself. London – but also Kortrijk where it was presented for the first time in 2007 – has a lot of deep listening to offer. To be continued in Kortrijk from 2013 onwards.

Peninsula Voices

plan b (Dan Belasco Rogers & Sophia New)

It must have been 2007 or 2008 when I experienced 'Peninsula Voices'<sup>4</sup> by plan b in Greenwich, London. Dan Belasco Rogers and Sophia New met each other in the theatre company Reckless Sleepers. Not

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<sup>2</sup> 'Soundwalking: creating moving environmental sound narratives', draft for a publication in 'The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies' by Dr. Andra McCartney, Associate Professor, Communication Studies, Concordia University Montréal

<sup>3</sup> South London Gallery and Goethe Institut London, 10 November – 18 December 2005, organised by Electra Productions

<sup>4</sup> <http://peninsulaprojects.net>

unimportant to understand their work. Dan Belasco Rogers' strong interest in sound was presented through performance, while Sophia had a strong performance background. This explains the more narrative and performative context of their projects. 'Peninsula Voices' is a sonic walk through the spaces of the Greenwich peninsula area. It talks about the huge transformation of this area through personal journeys of the participants, sounds and comments added by plan b. These form a new map, with sound as guide. The GPS-software triggers the sound: entering a certain spot will distribute the connected sound through headphones. For a few hours you are drawn into the history and the present of this London burrough. An abstract narration in a non-linear way. From the rise and fall of the East Greenwich Gas Works with its large gas holders to the construction of the much debated Millenium Dome. A similar project was produced by arts centre Buda Kortrijk for the area known as Buda Island under the title 'Into the Light of the Night'<sup>5</sup> (plan b in collaboration with the Belgian field recorder Els Viaene).

#### Oto-Date Na-Gi-Sa Akio Suzuki

In the summer of 2008 the Japanese artist Akio Suzuki realised his Oto-Date in Berlin. Oto-Date is a series of works in which Suzuki only uses the existing sound of different cities. His walk is very close to the soundwalk definition of Hildegard Westerkamp: *'...any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment...'*. In the case of Suzuki we need to add: perceive the environment. This 72 years old artist makes 'audiovisual slices' of the city. He creates points of listening and points of – literally – view. On chosen spots he paints ears that look like feet on the ground. By using these positions you enter his world. Two examples make it clear. Suzuki lets you face the edge of a house. With your left eye you look to the street left to you, with your right eye to the street on your right. The same 'split' happens in your ears. Next situation: Suzuki offers you a close view in front of a tree trunk. Your left eye looks into a street with a church, your right eye is focussing on the trunk. Again the same dichotomy happens to your ears. This project seems so simple, yet it is so precise. The perception of a certain spot becomes totally different. Regardless if you live around the corner and have passed it already a hundred times or if you visit the neighbourhood for the first time.

#### The Walk Book Janet Cardiff

I never had the occasion to experience a walk by Janet Cardiff myself. But this book totally hooked me up. 'The Walk Book' is an 'stricto sensu' an art book. It remembers several art projects - immersive walks - she presented in different cities. Amongst others the famous 'Her Long Black Hair' for Central Park, New York City. This publication is a book, a cd, text of the walks, texts about the walks, drawings and inserted photographs. Of course you do not get the real stuff, but Cardiff makes it happen whilst sitting at your table and listening to her voice, giving instructions to browse the book in a non-linear way. From the moment you hear her voice a mental soundwalk is commencing: *'Do your headphones on. You won't get the full effect of the audio unless you do. This is the right ear. And this is the left ear. (...) 'I'm in Berlin right now, sitting on my couch with the walk book in front of me on the table. Maybe the book is also on your coffee table. Open it up. Turn to page 233. I took this picture of an arrow the other day. I don't know why it was in the park, directing me as I walked, pointing at things. Like stones and trees. I'm gonna go back there today and see if it's still there. Now turn to the last page in the book. (Sneezes) Excuse me. I used to collect these types of photographs from detective magazines (...) Put the book down now and go over to your window (...) I woke up really early this morning, this is what it sounded like then. Sit down again, I want to show you something else in the book. Turn to page 121 (...) I want you to walk with me...'*<sup>6</sup> Please do, I can only recommend it.

These four projects do work with 'deep listening'. You need to reserve time to discover them. No hurry. It are not projects that *'seem to be necessary to do such things in our society'*. They are projects that grow out of a necessity of artist and their artistic practice. The least of their ambition is to promote a city or a region. Or to commercialise their projects. Their projects are reflections, contradictions, comments, raised questions, different points of listening, of view in relation to space, in casu the city environment. Please continue dear artists. Doing so is a stimulant to not be superficial, to go deeper. To listen deeper. To look deeper. It's a pleasure to concentrate on your propositions about our daily environment.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.planbperformance.net/index.php?id=lightnight>

<sup>6</sup> The Walk Book, Janet Cardiff – cd, track 1

On Sunday 21 April 2013 the first two soundwalks for the new collection of sound walks for the city of Kortrijk will be premiered. Christina Kubisch will make an update on her 'Electrical Walk Kortrijk 2007'. The city went through a tremendous change. Blocks of houses were teared down in 2007 during her first visit. They made place for a completely new commercial centre. Curious to hear how she will deal with this.

The Brussels based artists David Helbich presents 'Kortrijk Tracks'. It started last year with one installation called 'Public Sound: Kortrijk-Jerusalem'<sup>7</sup>. The sounds of two totally different cities merged in a field recording composition and was distributed at the entrance gate of the Kortrijk beguinage. For 'Kortrijk Tracks' David prepares several tracks, field recording composition, for different places in the city. These will form a spiral on the city map. A spiral that leads you out of town, or inverse, that brings you from the outskirts to the centre. To be continued.

Oh yes, these walks will be available in a permanent way from 21 April 2013 onwards. They will be made available to the audience by ... the tourist office. I guess nobody's perfect.

Joost Fonteyne,  
Kortrijk, 16 december 2012.

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<sup>7</sup> exhibition 'Klinkende Stad: Publiek Geluid', Flanders Festival Kortrijk, 28 april – 13 May 2012